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Back with Penske,
Tracy thinks he'll
tap full potentialBy Beth Tuschak
USA TODAY

One of the fastest moves Paul Tracy ever made was saying "yes" when his former boss came calling.

Motor sports

Cut loose from team owner Roger Penske's IndyCar stable for the 1995 season, a rejuvenated Tracy says he couldn't be happier now that he's back in the fold.

"It's the flat-out best, head and shoulders above every other team," says Tracy, who teams with Al Unser Jr. at Marlboro-Penske in Sunday's Grand Prix of Miami IndyCar opener at the new Homestead Motorsports Complex. "The days of the big performance edge are gone — the rules have seen to that."

"There's a lot less red tape. When you need something, you go to Roger and it's handled. There's no middleman."

While his tenure last year with the Paul Newman-Carl Haas organization produced two wins, three seconds and a sixth-place finish in the PPG Cup standings, Tracy says it was clear teammate Michael Andretti was the No. 1 driver. In addition, the rigorous test schedule he'd transformed from chore to challenge was pared way back.

"It was frustrating not to be used to my full potential," says Tracy, 27. "This feels like I'm a dominant member of the team. I don't even mind the testing."

While some suggested Tracy's year-long hiatus from Penske came with a round-trip ticket, the Canadian says not only was that not the case, it enabled him to up the ante.

When Penske's team failed to qualify for last year's Indy 500, he conceded it sorely missed Tracy's endless testing.

Tracy's top demand? Bring back race engineer Nigel Beresford from England, a condition that has been met.

Content without being complacent, Tracy's biggest goal in



Exley Foto

Old acquaintance: Paul Tracy is driving for Roger Penske again.

'96 is to keep title contender Unser from claiming the series throne. That he expects his toughest competition to come from his teammate is, to Tracy, his return's biggest perk.

"We're going to focus on what we need to do; we'll be our own team," he says. "Whatever happens around us, with Al or anyone else, our goal is to be oblivious."

Now start: While he's predicting the most competitive season ever, Andretti isn't sure what to expect from the circuit's first stop at a new venue.

"The feeling of speed will be even more than Indianapolis," says Andretti, fourth in the '95 standings with one victory.

"The corners are tighter; you're entering at 200 mph and are flat out all the way. We don't know how the turbulence of 30 cars will affect us. The first 20 laps will be a learning experience for everyone."

Pit pass: Although everyone enters Homestead with zero competitive laps, Target Chip Ganassi driver Alex Zanardi has a steeper learning curve than some. An IndyCar rookie via Formula One, he not only faces his first oval-track traffic jam, he will perform his first Indy-style pit stops.

"In tests, the scariest sight was (fellow F1 crossover) Mark Blundell," said Zanardi, 29. "I looked in my mirror, and he was looking backward."

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